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SUBJECT: KHADDAM'S STREAM OF CRITICISM PUTS THE SARG BACK
ON THE DEFENSIVE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

11. Summary: (C) A range of contacts have described former VP Khaddam's December 30 interview with al-Arabiyya TV network as tremendously damaging to the regime. They characterize him as a very smart and highly experienced politician and statesman who would be unlikely to make such explosive remarks out of mere personal spite and without the backing of significant players. They believe his intent is to create "a UNIIIC problem for Asad," timed for maximum effect at a moment when external -- and UNIIIC -- pressure, on Syria had seemed to ease, and after the SARG had seemingly completed an extensive campaign to attack Mehlis and whip up nationalist sentiment. The consensus is that Khaddam plans to escalate with further attacks. (Note: Additional interviews this week would appear to corroborate this view.)

12. (C) Summary continued: One indicator of Khaddam's success will be whether he manages to prod other former regime figures to step forward and join him, say some contacts. A key dissident and opposition figure welcomed the remarks as a "quarrel among thieves" and a positive sign that the regime is slowly falling apart. A minority view insisted that Khaddam had said his piece, that the regime had already absorbed the blow (and reacted), and that there would be little further impact. While one should not prematurely count out a tenacious regime that has shown repeatedly that it has lots of fight left, it made a tremendous mistake by letting Khaddam leave the country, and has now begun to pay the price for that mistake. End Summary.

13. (C) DEEP CONCERN FROM REGIME SYMPATHIZER: Foreign policy analyst Imad Shueibi, who is close to the regime, expressed deep concern about the Khaddam interview, insisting that Khaddam is attempting to create a problem for President Bashar al-Asad with the UNIIIC investigation. In Shueibi's view, Khaddam's remarks and the UNIIIC demand for an interview with Asad "were coordinated" ahead of time, probably with U.S. and French involvement, in tandem with Sa'ad Hariri, from whom Khaddam had allegedly received some 30 million USD. Khaddam was also coordinating with former Syrian military chief Hikmat Shihabi and had met with Israel's Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Uri Lubrani, said Shueibi. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, on the other hand, had made clear to the SARG that the stability of the Asad regime was a redline, and hence they were not involved with Khaddam, assessed Shueibi.

14. (C) KHADDAM PLOTTING TO KILL ASAD? Khaddam's precise game plan was not clear, said Shueibi, but could possibly involve coordination with disaffected military officers and other elements inside Syria plotting to assassinate Asad. Such a

move could open the way for an eventual return to power by Khaddam. Without such a move "aimed at the top," it would be highly unlikely that Khaddam could affect the internal situation in a critical way. Shueibi pointed to serious obstacles in front of Khaddam, however, including powerful Syrian intelligence services and what he termed a total lack of support for Khaddam from the Syrian street, alienated by his and his family's corruption and by Khaddam's unconvincing attempt to served as a standard-bearer for political reform after 30 years of unquestioning involvement with a deeply authoritarian regime.

15. (C) THE TIMING: Ihsan Sankar, Sunni businessman and former MP (with political ambitions) focused on the timing of Khaddam's remarks, noting that they came as pressure on the regime seemed to have eased and certain countries, including "Sunni countries in the region like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey" appeared to be moving toward helping Syria. "He wanted to freeze that movement," said Sankar, largely by creating a problem for Asad with the UNIIIC. He also waited until the Syrians had expended their anti-Mehlis, pro-nationalism campaign, before "sweeping all of it away" with his remarks.

16. (C) WILL KHADDAM SAY MORE? Sankar predicted (correctly, as subsequent interviews have demonstrated) that Khaddam will continue speaking out, escalating gradually. Now, after the campaign against him in Syria, he has a credible reason to speak out again, to defend himself, and turn up the heat even more, said Sankar. Khaddam is putting himself forward as "a bridge to the future" for Syria, an opening for political opposition to the regime, though he probably knows that he himself is not likely to achieve political power in Syria, insisted Sankar. In addition, Khaddam is motivated by a desire to settle accounts with the Asad regime.

17. (C) SUNNI AND ALAWITE SUPPORT FOR KHADDAM: According to Sankar, Khaddam has some Sunni support in Syria, largely outside Damascus, in towns like Idlib, Hama, Tartous, and Lattakia. A powerful Alawite cadre of disaffected, former regime heavyweights, including Ali Duba, Ali Zeyout, Ali Haydar, Izzedine Nasser, and (to a lesser degree) Mohammed Khouli (all military or security officers except Nasser) sympathize with Khaddam and share his view that regime decision-making under Bashar has been disastrous. In addition, they all deeply despise Mohammed Makhoulf, the financial advisor that Khaddam alluded to in his remarks as having amassed an eight-billion-dollar fortune. Sankar believes the situation in the country is in flux and the regime is very nervous. The street has not completely dismissed Khaddam because he is corrupt. People recognized that Khaddam's corruption is small-time compared to the billion-dollar fortunes amassed by people like the Makhoulfs and Jamil Asad. Many also see him as "dirty or harmful, but powerful medicine, like chemotherapy, needed to cure a malignant, cancerous regime," said Sankar.

18. (C) OPPOSITION WELCOMES REMARKS: Dissident intellectual Yassin Haj Saleh, imprisoned by the regime for 16 years, told Polchief the opposition in Syria is happy with Khaddam's remarks, "welcoming a quarrel among thieves as good for the people." The remarks and the subsequent fallout in Syria are also viewed as another step towards the dismantling of the regime. In Saleh's view, Khaddam's intervention, like Ghazi Kana'an's "suicide," shows that the regime is slowly losing its grip on its own key people. The regime, however, has a secret weapon, "its own weakness" (and the West's fear of

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chaos), assessed Saleh. Saleh repeatedly expressed fears that the U.S. would waver and step in to give the regime an extension, "a la Lahoud," prompted by fear of instability and a takeover by fundamentalists, fears he believes are exaggerated.

19. (C) KHADDAM SEEN AS USEFUL WEAPON: Like Sankar, Saleh viewed Khaddam as "not really an alternative to the regime,

but useful in weakening it." Saleh also mentioned Khaddam's Sunni background as significant but noted that he needed "to solve his Alawite problem" by getting at least one key Alawite leader to side with him. Saleh told Polchief that the key questions arising from Khaddam's remarks are "What are his plans and who are his partners?" In his view, Khaddam is too clever and experienced a politician to have embarked on such a course alone, out of a fit of pique. Saleh ticked off Sa'ad Hariri, the Saudis (who, he noted, own al-Arabiyya network), and the French as possible Khaddam co-conspirators.

¶10. (C) "A LATE CHRISTMAS PRESENT:" Human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni described Khaddam's remarks as "a late Christmas present" for Syria's political opposition. He also took the view that the question now is whether others formerly in the regime, including some inside Syria, would "begin talking."

¶11. (C) ASSESSING DAMAGE TO THE SARG: Taking a minority view, Sunni gadfly economist and former SARG official Dr. Riyadh Abrash dismissed any long-term impact from Khaddam's remarks. In his view, the regime has already absorbed the blow and moved on. He did not expect the Parliament to continue to deal with the issue, since the MP's, led by his cousin, Speaker Mahmoud Abrash, had already issued all the necessary denunciations and insults. Like other observers here (many of them regime proxies), Abrash pointed to Khaddam and his sons' reputations for corruption and ill-gotten wealth as having discredited him completely in the eyes of Syrians on the street and hence undermined the significance of the remarks. The harsh SARG reaction was not because it felt threatened but rather because in Arab political culture, a stage of vicious insulting is expected after a major political quarrel, assessed Abrash.

¶12. (C) OPPOSITION'S WISHPFUL THINKING?: Abrash dismissed as the opposition's wishful thinking the view that the U.S. (possibly with others) was somehow cooperating now with Khaddam and had encouraged the former VP to make the comments. While some of them would try to magnify the significance of the remarks, the opposition inside Syria was so weak that critical commentary about the regime would not provide any significant support or make any difference, he said. Abrash was equally dismissive as to whether Khaddam could influence the UNIIIC inquiry in a way that might be harmful to Syria's interests. Abrash argued that the SARG

has already managed, with the help of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to shield Asad and limit any potential damage, and the regime is ready if necessary to sacrifice lower-level officials to UNIIIC.

¶13. (C) Comment: The majority opinion, that Khaddam's remarks are damaging to the regime, particularly as he escalates his attacks, seems the more persuasive view. It is true, as Abrash points out, the opposition is weak and unable to extract much benefit from Khaddam at present. But the real impact will be if Khaddam's continued public criticism emboldens other former regime pillars to abandon their code of silence and speak out, further weakening a regime already struggling to retain its legitimacy and continue to function. Already, Khaddam's remarks appear to have rejuvenated a flagging UNIIIC probe, dissipating in the process the regime's smug sense of having bested the investigation, and putting the SARG - at least momentarily - back on the defensive. End comment.

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